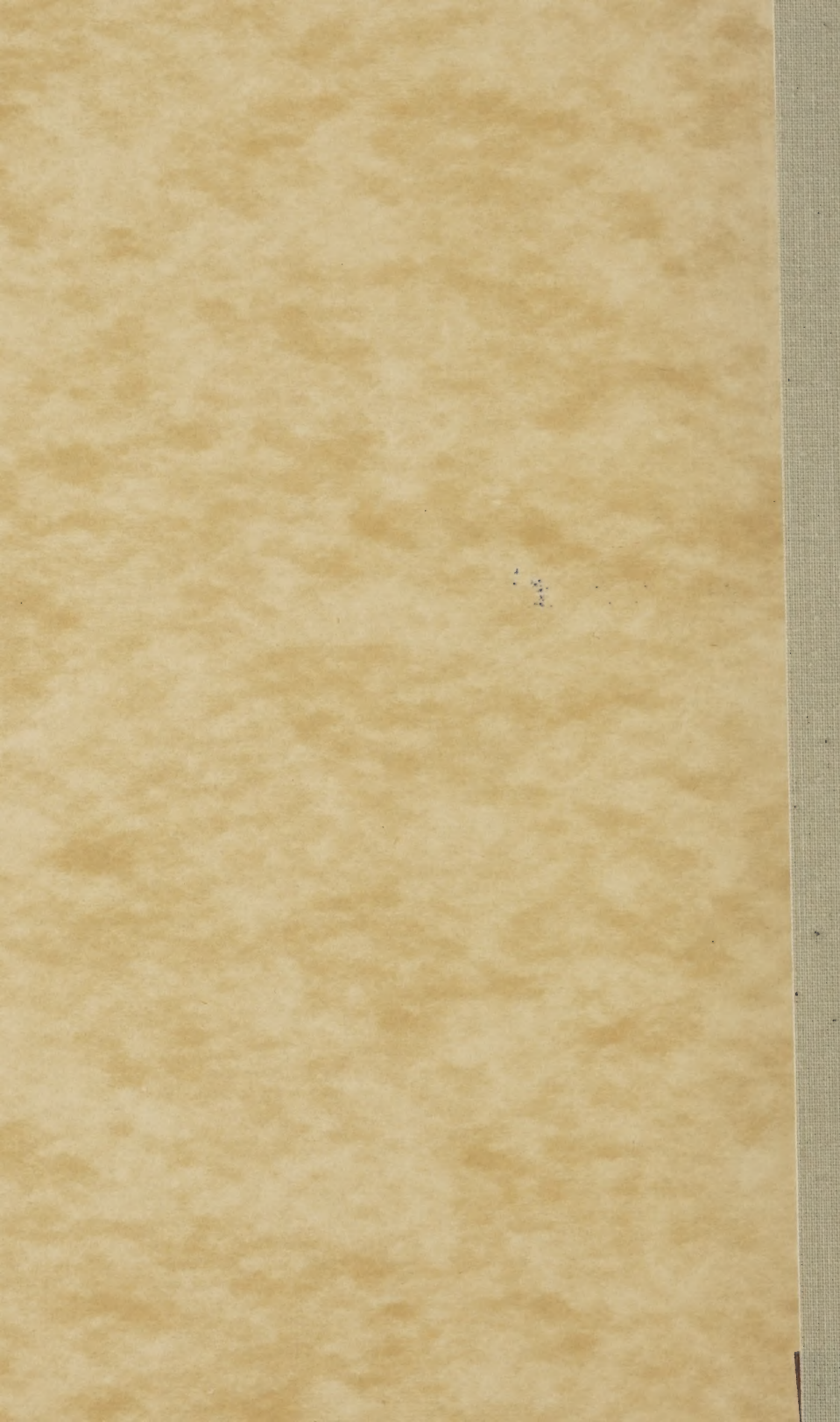


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# Shakespeare

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## Spiritual Life

by

JOHN MASEFIELD

HON. D.LITT.

*The Romanes Lecture*

Delivered in the Sheldonian Theatre

4 June, 1924

OXFORD  
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1924



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## SHAKESPEARE AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

VICE-CHANCELLOR, Heads, Professors, and Members of this University, and you, Ladies and Gentlemen, who have come here to hear me, it is my task to-day to speak of Shakespeare and Spiritual Life.

I have to speak this to the University, that is, to one of the great bodies of life which persists century after century, changing continually, yet remaining a unity; making a bond among men, one of the subtlest and strongest bonds, of youth passed in brotherhood; linking the present to the past, and both to the future. The world moves as such bodies as this direct, whether to the trusting spirit, as in the past, or to the inquiring mind, as at the present time, or to the illuminated mind that shall be. I feel like this present minute addressing seven centuries.

In the beginning let me say this: that by Spiritual Life I mean all imagined or apprehended Life which, without known, sensible, physical character, affects, or is imagined to affect, the lives of men and women in this world. I do not mean any way or rule of sanctity or austerity practised by devout persons of the great religions.

\* \* \* \*

Man consists of body, mind, and imagination. His

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English Research Bernbaum. 15524. Stecher.

body is faulty, his mind untrustworthy, but his imagination has made him remarkable. In some centuries, his imagination has made life on this planet an intense practice of all the lovelier energies.

Imagination is controlling and using the energy of which we are made. Those who succeed in this have access, through their partial energies, to all energy. The thoughts of these men have the divinity of all energy: they do not die.

Thought and image in these states of energy are one; together they make poetry; that mixture of idea with language which lives.

Anything thought of with this energy becomes alive. When many think for centuries with this energy, about man's utmost ideals, living thoughts of beauty and power take shape, are seen, and influence conduct. The imagined heaven *is*, here and now, a beauty and power.

\* \* \* \*

Great poets are not what is called 'pioneers of thought'. Usually they come towards the end of a remarkable mood of this world, and are remarkable because they preserve any thought or enjoyment that that mood had. They are great as that thought and enjoyment are great, since the life about them must necessarily be their foundation even if it be not their material.

\* \* \* \*

All people use their imaginations when they think and enjoy. All, at such times, create living mental images according to their strength. The great poet gives intense life to the images in the mental world of

his time. He makes bread out of the crop his world grows.

\* \* \* \*

If the intense thought and enjoyment of his time be in things which transcend this life of ours, as in times of belief in saints and devils, then the intense images of his work will be spiritual.

Things are real or not, according to belief in them.

\* \* \* \*

Body and mind, however erring, are intensely concerned in any act of imagination. Hand and mind make the moulds which the imagination presently overflows.

\* \* \* \*

In the early sixteenth century, the imaginations of men overflowed the moulds of the world's mind. Those moulds, both of Church and State, were broken. Both by knowledge and imagination, the world's mind had grown bigger ; it needed a larger scheme in which it could believe.

The half-century of the overflowing of the moulds was one of intense mental exaltation. Its chief result for us was the preparation of the ground for the coming of our great poet.

\* \* \* \*

Shakespeare was not trained for his life's work by any institution. His problems were not solved for him. He picked up the food for his mind wherever he could find it : it was not found for him. Better still, it was not selected for him and forced into him.

He was born of middle-class parents, in a house which



was neither fine nor poor, in a town of no great importance, in a country-side not otherwise distinguished. There is lovely country near it; cattle pasture in the lowland and sheep pasture in the hills. Country life could be seen there at its best: farming, shepherding, and hunting.

The amusements of the place, apart from the sports, were fairs. Sometimes a company of actors came there.

The most beautiful work of art in the place was the parish church, which had been finished about fifty years before Shakespeare's birth. Changes in religious thought and in the fashions of art had no doubt made it seem old-fashioned and rather vulgar when Shakespeare was a boy. The people who built it had gone: their outlook and beliefs were gone: it was all pre-Reformation: it must have seemed old, barbarous: what Victorianism is to us. We all can teach our grandmothers.

I must say a few words about the England of that time:—

England generally was sloughing the middle ages. The active and inquiring mind had questioned, challenged, and overthrown the guidance and dominion of the Church. Rabelais had said, 'Do what you will; do the thing you want to do'; and this was being done by great men everywhere.

The land was self-supporting, though subject to years of scarcity. It was under-populated. The towns were small, and though, in some ways, they were filthier than our modern towns, the air was cleaner: men could walk from even the largest town into pleasant country in twenty minutes.

Work of a noble standard was being done in every way of mind and hand. Our coins were the loveliest in Europe.

The laws were savage, but that did not matter: the race, being law-abiding, kept the laws.

Pestilence visited the land each summer: sometimes terribly.

The race was much what it is to-day; a kindly, humorous race of individuals, each cherishing some little or big personal queerness of interest or intellect, and therefore not working well together in institutions, but uniting in sport, and giving much (as individuals) to the common weal. Our institutions sometimes fail, our individuals save us.

There was one great difference between Shakespeare's England and ours. England then was an English country. It had not yet been governed by the Scotch; the Welsh were rarities anywhere east of the Severn; the Irish were almost unknown.

Those were the days of which tradition speaks, when it says that England was merrie.

\* \* \* \*

Shakespeare grew up in the heart of this English England. What did he learn as a child?

First, as to his religion. His father was a middle-class Protestant, who attended Church of England services as long as he could do so without fear of arrest for debt. His mother was a conforming Protestant with some Catholic relatives. Shakespeare was bred and remained a conforming Protestant: that is, there is no record of his being summoned for not going to church.

Next, as to his superstitions. He was born into a superstitious country society, at a time when the land was undrained, the roads unpaved, and the winter nights unlighted. From November till March travelling after dark was almost impossible. People sat by the fire and told stories of fairies, witches, and ghosts who then made darkness terrible all over the country-side.

Besides these things, there were other things. If, like St. Withold, you 'footed thrice the wold', you were likely to meet the Night Mare and her ninefold. The wold was only three or four miles from Stratford, up Meon Hill: the Night Mare ran there with her ninefold. In that under-populated England the Night Mare and her ninefold had a wide range of pasture. It was a long way between churches.

\* \* \* \*

Next, as to the period in history which seemed romantic to him as a boy. This must always be a deciding element in the growth of a poet, especially of a poet like Shakespeare, whose main teaching came from popular tradition.

To Shakespeare this romantic time was certainly the time of the later Wars of the Roses, when his great-grandfather served Henry VII. There was some family tradition about this great-grandfather, who seems to have done the Lancastrians useful service, long since forgotten.

\* \* \* \*

Next, as to Shakespeare's schooling. This was sufficient for his needs: a little more at that time might have warped his use of English, or made him ashamed



of English practice. Like most geniuses, Shakespeare had a power of self-protection which excluded what did not serve the needs of his being. Knowledge was not the law of his being: he got as much as was good for him; no more.

Lastly, as to what kindled him to poetry: I wish we knew. Plenty of books were in the world by the time he went to school: some good old English poets and other English poets who seemed good, being new. Besides the printed books, there was some spoken poetry in the world: there were ballad-singers, pot-poets, and touring companies of actors. I imagine that poetry was an interest and a delight to him before he left Stratford.

\* \* \* \*

Let me now run over these things very briefly, to see what they amounted to. They were the things which most influenced the growth of a great poet's mind from without.

Orthodox religion, whether as ritual or as dogma, seems to have meant almost nothing to him.

His mental training on what we may call the masculine, or schoolmaster side, was also a slight thing to him. I think it gave him the feeling that dead flies had been put into the ointment of the apothecary.

His mental training on what we may call the feminine, or old wives' tale side, was always profoundly important to him: it made his intensest self.

The memory of the country-side, the tradition of the great events of the past, which had led to marchings and violent deaths up and down the four counties best known to him, was much to him.

That is: Religion meant almost nothing to him, education little more, tradition a great deal more, and superstition very much indeed.

These were the things brought to him by others. Let us now consider the aptitudes within himself.

From the very first, he had an intense delight in the beauty of natural objects; a love of flowers, of effects of light, of the flights and cries and songs of birds, of the colours, joys, and changes of the seasons; of the flavour that these things give to life, and of the intensity of joy that comes from being at one with such mysteries.

Next, as he survived a Tudor childhood in a house where even the children would have had some share in the work, it is fair to suppose that he grew up to be a robust lad. Later on, even a few years later, the poems suggest that he lost this robustness, perhaps only for a time. But before he left Stratford, he was no doubt robust and took a wild young man's share in all the sport of the country-side. All the energy that was afterwards turned inwards, was then turned outwards: all through his young manhood he was full of fun: very boisterous fun; but his chief delight was hunting: all his early work shows how much the sights and excitements of hunting meant to his imagination.

He had, therefore, intense zest for the beauty and the rush of life. On the top of these two zests, sex ran in him like a sea.

These things together made up his equipment for the craft and mystery of poetry, whose kingdom is not altogether of this world. In this world, things went unluckily for the young man. He seems to have been trapped into an undesirable marriage, and to have been

in question for poaching, if not for libel. He came to London, to make a fresh start.

\*            \*            \*            \*

There is not a trace of spiritual life in the work with which he made his fresh start. On the contrary, his earliest work is full of temporal fashion. Very soon in his career he learned to indulge his will and to write out of what was strongest in him, his sense of country life and tradition. He trusted in that and in his own imaginative energy.

He wrote easily and happily for at least ten years.

His work in those ten years was matchless in comedy, in lyric, in variety and colour of character, and in grace and charm of spirit and verse. No such work had been done by any European: it was both new and lovely. It was the work of one too well content to watch

                    beauty like a dial-hand  
Steal from his figure,

to ask if the figure meant anything or what works might be behind the dial.

Of definite religious belief, feeling, or opinion, there are, perhaps, a few barely discernible glimmers or rays, as of faintly awakened memory. One or two other glimmers show, perhaps, a sentimental sympathy with the idea of contemplation in seclusion. A saintly contemplative of no precise creed, who is yet empowered to marry people, appears in several plays. Besides this shadowy sympathy, there is a shadowy evidence of a dislike of Puritanism. If one adds to these things a fondness for rituals which could be made effective on



a stage, one has perhaps the measure of the young man's religious feeling.

His standard of conduct, however, is very high : his sense of right and wrong is matchless : every age since him has felt this : one can give it no higher praise. It can be said of no other English writer.

Jews, Pagans, and Christians were men to him ; nothing more and no less : any least touch of religious bias in him would have blurred his vision of them.

\* \* \* \*

Though he had little learning and less faith, he had much superstition. Such spiritual life as does appear in his early plays comes unchanged from popular superstition.

His ghosts are those of popular belief. They are usually the spirits of wronged or murdered men and women, who threaten and rouse up vengeance against their betrayers and killers.

His fairies were of two kinds. Firstly, a minute kind described minutely in *Romeo and Juliet* ; and, secondly, a larger kind, big enough to appear upon the stage to pinch Falstaff and attend a fairy court in the wood near Athens.

Of these two, I think that Shakespeare had seen only the minute kind. He saw them with great distinctness, and described them with detail in action, just as he saw them. He saw them perhaps only once. It was a bright moment worth recording. Having described them, he saw other more important things in action, and turned to describe them. As one of his admirers says, 'He had the Phantsie very strong'.

The fairies which he saw in his imagination in the *Midsummer Night's Dream* are not those of popular English tradition. They are not wild enough, nor unearthly and malicious enough. English, Welsh, and Scottish fairies terrify. A seer once said to me: 'If a man tells you that he has seen the fairies, look if he be shaken. If he be not terrified, be sure that he has not seen.' Shakespeare knew this very well. He took care to explain that his fairies were not those creatures who haunt at midnight by moonlight and are terrible, but shapes from India.

Remember that many in his audience had seen fairies; those who had, wanted no more of them. Shakespeare gave them gracious romantic inventions, who speak charming verse about the weather.

Apart from fairies, both in popular tradition and Shakespeare's system, yet of fairy nature, and in some ways linked to fairies, is the solitary spirit of Puck or Robin Goodfellow, called good in propitiation.

It is plain that Shakespeare liked to have an elvish boy in a play of his. There can be no doubt of that. It is also plain that there was in Shakespeare's company of players a boy who did not grow any bigger. There may, of course, have been a succession of boys, and yet I do not think so. This boy seems to have been specially tiny and a most remarkable comic actor. The smallness and the comic talent coming together, as they do in several plays, give me the impression of a person. I think that he played Moth in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Puck in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Falstaff's page, both in *Henry IV* and in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Maria in *Twelfth Night*, the Player Queen

in *Hamlet*, Mamillius in the *Winter's Tale*, and Ariel in *The Tempest*. I think of him as a real and strange figure, who was important to the company throughout Shakespeare's poetical life, and whose talents were often in Shakespeare's mind when he began a new play. I dare say that the company looked upon him with tenderness, as a mascot.

I am not going to strain the point any farther, because it is neither important nor very likely to be proved. It leads me to this further point, that when Shakespeare considered his own genius, he thought of it as an attendant boy-spirit. It is certain that in *The Tempest* he thought of his own genius as Ariel. In the late, irregular sonnet, number 126, he addresses this genius thus:

O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy power  
Dost hold Time's fickle glass his sickle hour;  
Who hast by waning grown, and therein show'st  
Thy lovers withering as thy sweet self grow'st:  
If Nature, sovereign mistress over wrack,  
As thou goest onward still will pluck thee back,  
She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill  
May Time disgrace and wretched minutes kill.  
Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure!  
She may detain but not still keep her treasure;  
Her audit, though delayed, answered must be,  
And her quietus is to render thee.

In the great moments of his imaginings, whether in dream or vision, I do not doubt that that lovely boy did appear to him with some message which Time cannot kill. To the extraordinary man extraordinary things are done, which ordinary people call coincidences. They are not coincidences: they come from the



Helpers that attend all kindled imaginations. It behoves everybody to strive with the imagination, because only so do the Helpers come down into this earth ; where many are striving, many help.

\*            \*            \*            \*

So much for the spiritual life in the early work.

That work came out of the strongest elements in his nature, till those elements were so quarried and that nature was so changed, that they were no longer strong. There was a hesitation in the nature at this point in his career. He had written *Henry IV*, Parts I and II, with all the strength of his sense of country life, of comedy and of history. The plays had been deservedly great successes ; they had made much money, and, according to the legend, the sayings and doings of Falstaff had won the virginal mind of Queen Elizabeth.

On the wind or wings of this success Shakespeare wrote two plays which show that it was slack water with him. He had reached that age in the middle thirties which is said to be fatal to genius. Many geniuses, having come to an end of their development, do die at that time. Growth is the rare thing. Many men can be, and are, poets in their youth ; but the many are common and do not grow ; only the rare poet grows ; and the growth of even the rarest poet may be capricious, may come in bursts between intervals of apparent death. Those two plays, written at that critical age, are works of a skill so certain, that it has almost become a habit. Men going to them, even men who cared intensely for Shakespeare's poetry, must

have felt, from seeing them, that the manner was hardening into a habit, that he was applying a method to his subjects, that his comedy was become formula and his lyric gone. He was not growing.

Perhaps, over their beer, the exquisite ladies of the mansions at the back of the Strand talked of him, at that tide in his affairs, with pity, as a man of no real refinement spoiled by writing for people with no real taste.

\* \* \* \*

Now artists of all kinds exist and progress by destroying those selves of them which, having flowered, have served. They are continually sitting in judgement upon themselves, and annihilating their pasts by creating their opposites. They know, better than any one, that they can only be saved if they are born again. They know that they must follow their formulae unless their excitement over some new idea be strong enough to burst a new channel. The great writer is as unexpected as life, and follows no formula: his morrow is not as his yesterday, and his night may blaze with comets.

\* \* \* \*

Out of some such rebellion and annihilation came *Twelfth Night*. There all the lovely, the lyrical, the golden in him overthrew all that was common, instinctive, and of the nature of habit. It was a new Shakespeare which no man could have foretold.

But between *Twelfth Night* and the great tragedies there is an even greater gulf than between *Twelfth*

*Night* and *Henry V.* In his earlier plays he had seen the actions and passions of men and women whimsically, fantastically, romantically, rhetorically, clearly, and intensely : now suddenly he saw them startlingly, and the difference is profound.

Many of you here are writers who know the excitement of creative writing, and the sense of power which comes with the clear sight and full possession of the truth groped for, arrived at, mastered, proven, and now to be set down. You will know that that achievement and attainment is a peak or summit in life, a triumph of body and mind working flawlessly together, a piece of rhythm such as can only come rarely, when the sea and the boat and the boat's crew are all in tune and time. Such achievement is a touching of the perfected self and an attainment of personal mastery ; it is rare in life, being the excellence of life ; but all who practise the arts have their good days, and many of you here have known it.

But rarer than this, and more excellent, is another excitement which uses the other only as a ladder.

All about the personality there is a wall or barrier of custom, work, memory, our conscious mind and the world's. On the rare day, the golden day, a man can climb on the power of his excitement almost to the top of this wall, and look down upon himself and see his mind all spread out as a little garden, or little church, or little town, or little kingdom, according to his extent. But some men, on still rarer and more golden days, climb to the very top of the wall and do not look down, but look over, and see the nature of life which endures longer than dynasties or creeds : being the royalty



above kingship and the truth on which creeds are based.

\* \* \* \*

All life is an attempt to get beyond the barriers of self: some attempt it by drunkenness or devotion, some by love, drugs, danger, or the arts; others by one of the churches or by service: many attempt it blindly, many more under guidance which may be blind. They attempt it because they hope that beyond their own personal nature they may touch the nature of the world.

It was in *Julius Caesar* that he climbed from his instinctive and romantic self into the adventure of great poetry.

No doubt, like all poets, at first, he saw no more in the fable than the opportunity for some big scenes: then, no doubt, he saw opportunities for the display of his own special powers, of being natural in the imagined scene and lyrical in the imagined passion. Plutarch gave him his subject simplified, and in a more gracious style than Holinshed ever compassed. The use of the theatre was second nature to him: he saw all things, even himself, in terms of drama. When he began to write, an excitement in the bigness and splendour of his subject made him see farther than he had seen hitherto; he began to see startingly.

Instantly, he saw old Rome, full of life, strong in its order, moving as though the wars and winter were over and spring come, with peace. Then instantly, with the speed and certainty of power, he saw men of no great importance, ordinary, good, stupid, sarcastic, usual men, gathering to kill the head of Rome, who

kept that life and order going. He saw life in its essentials for what it is, an order of intense power, revolving with immense energy about a centre or axle, like a spinning-wheel. The spinning about that centre in his vision, as in truth, is the main business of it, ordained from of old from some divine source of rhythm and harmony; any upsetting of that spinning, from whatever motive, even the noblest motive that ever lured men to devilry, is devilish and from a hellish source of broken rhythm and disharmony. And at this point in his play he saw very clearly that outside this spinning world of spinning societies of fiercely whirling men, are powers or states of spirit who cannot act directly upon men, but who do not want the rhythm broken, and strive to keep it running and to save its threatened axle, by all sorts of promptings, inarticulate cryings, efforts which are misunderstood and warnings which are misinterpreted. These powers are of that heart of things against which the working brain of man is ever a barrier. Only in childhood, in the ecstasy of absorption, and in the illumination of power, can man apprehend them.

In the effort of this great heart to make itself heard across that fence of steel, the wills of the plotters, a storm is roused in things subject to its power. Shakespeare in all this was following his fable closely, but seeing it startlingly, so that to us, as to him, the storm is the very thunder of the power of life, more true than any truth, more real than any reality known to us. In that storm which precedes or accompanies the great crime, the dead, whose wills are stilled, are drawn to walk from their graves, animals are shaken to

madness, voices cry in the air, all nature rings with warning which yet never reaches the threatened man, because it is Fated so. If it were not Fated, all that invisible power and other protecting powers would fight unseen on Caesar's side, bridling the plotters' wills, parrying the plotters' daggers, or blasting the plotters dead.

When all the efforts of the invisible to avert the Fate have failed, the hour strikes, Caesar is killed. There follows a numbness upon the play, like Death itself. The will of the plotter is glutted, Caesar is dead, and now it is seen that there was nothing in the plotters except the will to kill Caesar: now that that is done, they are no longer anything. Revolutionaries seldom are anything beyond the will to destroy. Destruction is always easy, and to violent and thoughtless people very pleasant. To make something is never easy, and to violent and thoughtless people it is always impossible.

When the plotters have killed Caesar, they are made to realize that they have killed something vital to the world, which they cannot replace, and also that they have set going into the world a power of evil which can be released for blood, yet only appeased and chained by the blood of those who set it free. They are chased up and down the world until they are all gone, while Rome, the city which they had, as they supposed, 'set free', spins again upon a new axle, much like the one they destroyed, quite as hard, but newer and likelier to endure.

The play is spiritually true: that is, no time nor fashion of men can find it false: the nature of things



acts thus; men act thus; great events come thus attended by spirits, happen thus with disharmony, and end thus when the world or the state has a new axle upon which it can turn. The play was a new kind of vision of all the old evidences of the scheme of things. Everybody had heard from childhood of warnings, crimes, ghosts, revenges, and retributions. They had been old wives' tales and effective theatrical tricks to everybody. Shakespeare looked into the heart of them, till he saw how they come: out of the heart of the things of which we are members.

The question how they come to be in the heart of things was also in his mind. He decided that they are in the heart of things because we think that they are, and that if we think burningly that a thing exists, that thing does exist, according to the intensity of our belief. 'Thinking makes it so.'

After this first great visionary play, Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, which seems to be a questioning of vision. In *Julius Caesar* he had had profound visionary knowledge, attended with every ecstasy of power, of the spiritual nature of change in this world. The visitation of such ecstasy of power cannot but be a shaking experience, even to a man so infinitely greater than ourselves. For the time, I do not doubt that it seemed to Shakespeare a revelation of himself, the world, and the universe. But almost at once, all that was of the Renaissance in him, all the inquiring mind in him, rose up to test that revelation. These portents, even when illuminated, even when made real by excitement, what are they but superstition? These ghosts, however just their cries for vengeance, are no holier,

than men ; they are as bloody and unmerciful as their killers, and far less holy than a fine man.

In *Hamlet* he imagines one lit (as he had been) with visionary knowledge, yet setting up a standard of fineness of thought against that knowledge, as though, whatever the multitude may imagine, the fine mind is still a finer thing. All the Renaissance was based on that idea, and every church is against it. It is right ; it is lawful ; to the fine mind it must in all ages be the chief law :

neither is it lawful

That he should stoop to any other law.

But, lawful or not, it is not expedient to act with a fineness beyond the purpose of this world. Hamlet disobeys the orders given to him in vision ; he questions them ; he thinks subtly ; he thinks, which in itself is a rebellion against destiny. Destiny is not altered, in this case, by the taking of thought : it is only made more tragical. Destiny is to be fulfilled by action, and in this case, in the end, is fulfilled by the sweeping away of the wicked man after he has destroyed the thinker. Destiny wins, yet the fine mind was right ; it was lovelier than Destiny.

Three important plays follow this : they are plays of thought, not of vision. They are the difficult plays : *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Othello*. *Troilus* is the bitterest and the strangest, and the other two the most skilful of all the plays. A great deal of ink and thought is spent to this day in writing upon all three ; for which I refer you to the inker and the thinker. It is very hard to say what was in Shakespeare's mind when he wrote the three. Mainly, it

seems to have been a brooding upon government. Having seen in *Julius Caesar* the horror of rebelling, he seems to have considered the lesser horror of being governed by the fool, the dupe, and the knave, and not rebelling.

In *Troilus and Cressida* he seems to be defining what he loathed in life, in women and authority. In *Measure for Measure* he sees government, the most important of all things, being upset, in men and states, by desire coming with opportunity. Some 'fantastical Duke of dark corners' goes away, at the bidding of a fantasy, leaving Angelo with an angel's power, which desire and opportunity make him use like a devil. In *Othello* government is in the hands of a credulous man, hated by a cunning man to whom chance gives opportunity after opportunity, till all that is lovely and generous is destroyed. His gift of lyrical excess was not with him when he wrote these plays; he seems to have been looking hard at life, with some disgust.

When he had finished *Othello*, he was forty years of age. He had written a great deal in many kinds of poetry, and for nearly two years had been more interested in structure than in vision. What was it which made him suddenly and swiftly blaze out into a poetry unlike anything in the world? There were lightnings of it in *Julius Caesar*, but in *Macbeth* it flamed.

We do not know why. Poets always do the best that they can at each time. Sometimes they fall below themselves, sometimes they rise above themselves. 'Of course he seems to hide his face, but unexpectedly returns.' We do not know why the *Macbeth* year was more glorious than any other. We can only suppose that all



prospered : a magnificent fable came at the magnificent moment ; but something more, perhaps, came. It may be that King James I, who, like his mother, grandfather, and great-grandfather, cared deeply for poetry and had himself written enough to understand when he was in the presence of a great poet, gave a magnificent and wise encouragement. Some one is said to say (it is the sort of thing that some one would say) ‘ that the greatest artist is he who is most helped ’. It is true. Great art does not proceed from a great criticism, but from great encouragement. The great mind being given his opportunity, does great things, and it is from these that criticism derives such principles as it has. The great times of art are those when power has the intelligence to encourage it.

Whatever main cause prompted Shakespeare, all other things, such as health, business, the people, the events of daily life, the weather, and some such happy state of national excitement as the settlement of the crown upon James, must have helped his work. In the tumult of creation and the calm of vision he saw once more the workings of spirits in human life. The vision is like that in which he saw Julius Caesar, but it is very much more intense.

In *Julius Caesar* he had seen powers outside human life trying to influence men for their good. In *Hamlet*, which is a distrusting of all such power, he had felt that promptings of the mind, especially those of the deeper mind, urging to caution, may be finer and wiser as guides to conduct. In *Macbeth* he saw powers (outside human life, and unable to act directly upon men) who want the rhythm of life broken, and strive to break it by

promptings, by inarticulate cryings which are misunderstood and prophecies which are misinterpreted. He saw these powers as parts of a devilish will in things, against which all that is upright in the soul of man is ever a barrier.

In the effort of this devilish will to make itself heard across all that is good in the heart of Macbeth, a storm is roused in things subject to its power: all nature rings with warning, which touches neither the tempted nor the threatened man, because it is Fated so; because the devilish will is, for the moment, too strong.

When the efforts of the devilish will have triumphed, the hour strikes, Duncan is killed. At once it is seen that there was nothing in Macbeth or his wife except the will to be King and Queen: now that that will is glutted, they are no more King and Queen than they were, they are two traitors trying to protect themselves by blood. They have set free into the world those leopards of blood which can only be chained by the blood of those who freed them.

All this is set forth with the utmost haunting magical power. All feel that power; but to a writer, to one, that is, who knows that what was set down (even by Shakespeare's power) was only one-third of what was seen, this poetry is overwhelming. Even in cold print the words are marvellous. When they are spoken, when they are given their value from a mind and their barb from a voice, they overcome. No man can hear them without knowing that Shakespeare as he wrote was at the heart of life, in that rush and exaltation of ecstatic order which scientists now proclaim. In the tranquillity of that energy, a thought not only took shape, it took

presence and passion ; blinding presence, overwhelming passion : virtues were pleading like angels, trumpet-tongued ; pity, like a naked new-born babe, was striding the blast, and heaven's cherubim were horsed

Upon the sightless couriers of the air.

I say that he touched the heart of life. In that mood, which was perhaps brief, perhaps only the half of one day (for I have no doubt that at least half of *Macbeth* was written at a sitting), his mind became pure energy and its thoughts partook of the nature of pure energy : they became indestructible. They are real, while Shakespeare is dust. Intense thought is the only reality. A church is only the testimony of many that this is true.

He did not quite reach this intensity again (even in *King Lear*), though his mind lived among glorious and lovely things until the end. At the very end, he considered the whole matter profoundly in his play of *The Tempest*. There he considers the Renaissance mind with the misgiving which comes to all who see the individual intellect soaring far beyond the social structure of its time. That misgiving is shared by all who carry on that Renaissance, of free inquiry, among ourselves. The attainment of intellectual power, being a life-work in itself, takes the man who should be the ruler from his government : he is thereupon deposed by the knavish and the greedy, and cast out among the brutish : unless he can bend spirits to his aid, this world will be no safe place for his daughter.

He frees an imprisoned Helper, who works for him in the shapes of the elemental and intellectual powers,



until the brutish is disciplined and the knavish have restored the power usurped.

No doubt the 'lovely boy', Ariel, was a real presence in Shakespeare's mind: one who had come there for many years, in many shapes, with help of many kinds, but was now craving to be gone. What was Sycorax, who could imprison this spirit for twelve years in a cleft pine-tree?

What was the spirit who could be so imprisoned? He brought into life all that Prospero willed, yet longed for life of his own.

Perhaps that is what happens to the thing intensely imagined: it demands what the men of the Renaissance demanded, leave to be themselves and to do what they wanted to do.

\* \* \* \*

In the last act of this play Prospero reckons up the spiritual life that obeys him and the spiritual powers that it has helped him to attain. The spiritual life is that of popular superstition: the elves, the sea-chasers and demi-puppets; the spiritual powers are those of the mind of energy in the moment of energy becoming one with energy.

\* \* \* \*

In this poem, Shakespeare considered man himself as an imagination.

We are such stuff  
As dreams are made of.

It is profoundly true. We are now what men imagined. More than that, we are miraculous substance which Energy is using to make these dreams, these theatres, these cities and marvels of men.

Yet even if a man become one with that energy and make dreams and imaginations out of this miraculous substance, it is but for a time :

Her audit, though delayed, answered must be.

The attendant spirit craves freedom, the artist loses the wish, if not the power, to charm, and the eye grows tired of the book. What remains for Prospero when he comes to want

Spirits to enforce, art to enchant ?

‘ My ending ’, he says :

My ending is despair,  
Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
Which pierces so that it assaults  
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.

That last line has been quoted as evidence of Shakespeare’s orthodoxy in religious matters ; but I think wrongly. The line brings into my mind the image that it sprang from in Shakespeare’s, some throned and lovely and benign Mercy, such as one of the great men of the Renaissance would have painted or carved. *Mercy itself*: no living thing. But I see a great and lovely figure, beyond all sex, throned somewhere and crowned, to whom the sharp prayer might pierce. Surely, if thought can reach to any such divine calm and gentle image, the faults of that mind are freed. He who had touched ideal form by thought could touch ideal quality by prayer.

\* \* \* \*

Some have written to prove that Shakespeare was a religious man. Others have written to prove that

among other things he was drunk, mad, a thief, illiterate, Welsh, Scotch, Irish, Italian, French, German, Bacon, Essex, Oxford, a soldier, a sailor, a lawyer, a butcher, and a schoolmaster. I believe that he was an English poet of a great and beautiful mind, who held to no religion save that of humanity and his own great nature.

The great men of his time were not men of religion, though religion had done its work in them. Shakespeare's age was religious, in its own way, which was not any way of fullness of life, giving all to build and beautify a church, either of souls or of stones. His age was not building churches (I do not remember to have seen one built in his time): it was preparing to smash churches and put up conventicles where one could hate one's neighbour as oneself.

It was an age indulging and beginning to repent its indulgence of the will and mind. To the cultured it was an age of belief in past ages: to Shakespeare, who had no culture, it was an age of belief in himself. He was like poor beauty in his sonnet: he did not

indirectly seek  
Roses of shadow,

since his own rose was truth itself.

\*            \*            \*            \*

There is another way to truth: by the minute examination of facts. That is the way of the scientist: a hard and noble and thankless way. It is not the way of the great poet, the rare unreasonable who comes once in ten generations. He apprehends truth by power:



the truth which he apprehends cannot be denied, save by greater power, and there is no greater power.

\* \* \* \*

All things are in the mind of the great poet in the moment of his power, because he touches energy, the source of all things, the reality behind all appearance. In the moment of his power he is made one with Nature: his being is completed and his work perfected by the force of life itself.

One other thing is true.

The effort to truth, beauty, and understanding is the strength of any age of men.

Seven, six, five, even four centuries ago, men put all their efforts towards truth, beauty, and understanding into their churches, which were at last made perfect. Then the great minds turned from the churches and exalted man whose mind had made every church. They realized that man is the real miracle because he can question the miracle. Man has questioned the miracle ever since, and found it daily more miraculous.

Shakespeare and his fellows exalted the miracle of man, whose passionate will marches like Tamburlaine, who was lame, yet conquered the world, and whose questioning mind probes like Hamlet, who was killed, yet was righter than Destiny. His statement is that of a company of complete men, who needed no guidance, but wielded power from within themselves, and were themselves invisible like the sun.

His strength is the strength of that time: he is the bread of that crop of men, whose delight was all passionate nature and whose art was therefore all passionate portraiture or passionate contest. Of spiritual religious

belief those pagans had hardly a trace: it made no part in their thought and enjoyment; you may therefore look in vain for it in Shakespeare, who did but make bread out of the corn they supplied. Of superstitious beliefs those pagans had many. Sometimes in his greatest moments these became luminous in Shakespeare's mind. The life which his imagination then gave them makes them alive for us: they are still spiritual forces influencing the world.

\* \* \* \*

It is belief that makes a thing: it need not be a fine belief: a coarse and strong belief is more likely to endure: that is why superstitions outlast creeds. Shakespeare had many superstitions, but his belief was in himself: out of that self he made his system, which moves us all profoundly, whatever creeds we profess. In that system man is warned, like Caesar, but follows his own Fate; he is tempted, like Macbeth, but is misled by his own heart; he is ordered, like Hamlet, but acts by his own wisdom. He is ruined by his own generosity, like Lear or Timon: he loves much and is little forgiven, like Antony: he is of a passionate credulity, like Othello: but in all these shapes man lives and dies by what is strongest in himself. Only in the last of the plays is there a spirit of beauty, and that spirit is not served by the artist, but serves the artist, and is kept to service only by the artist's will.

\* \* \* \*

And at the end of it all, Shakespeare was a sick old man on a bed, hoping that men would leave his bones in peace, and tempering prayer with curse in his appeal to them to spare them. Then they wrapped him in

a shroud and laid him in Stratford Church, where he lies quiet enough that once shook so with his sense of the glories of being man. 'My spirit', he wrote once, when he was a man in love:

My spirit is thine, the better part of me.

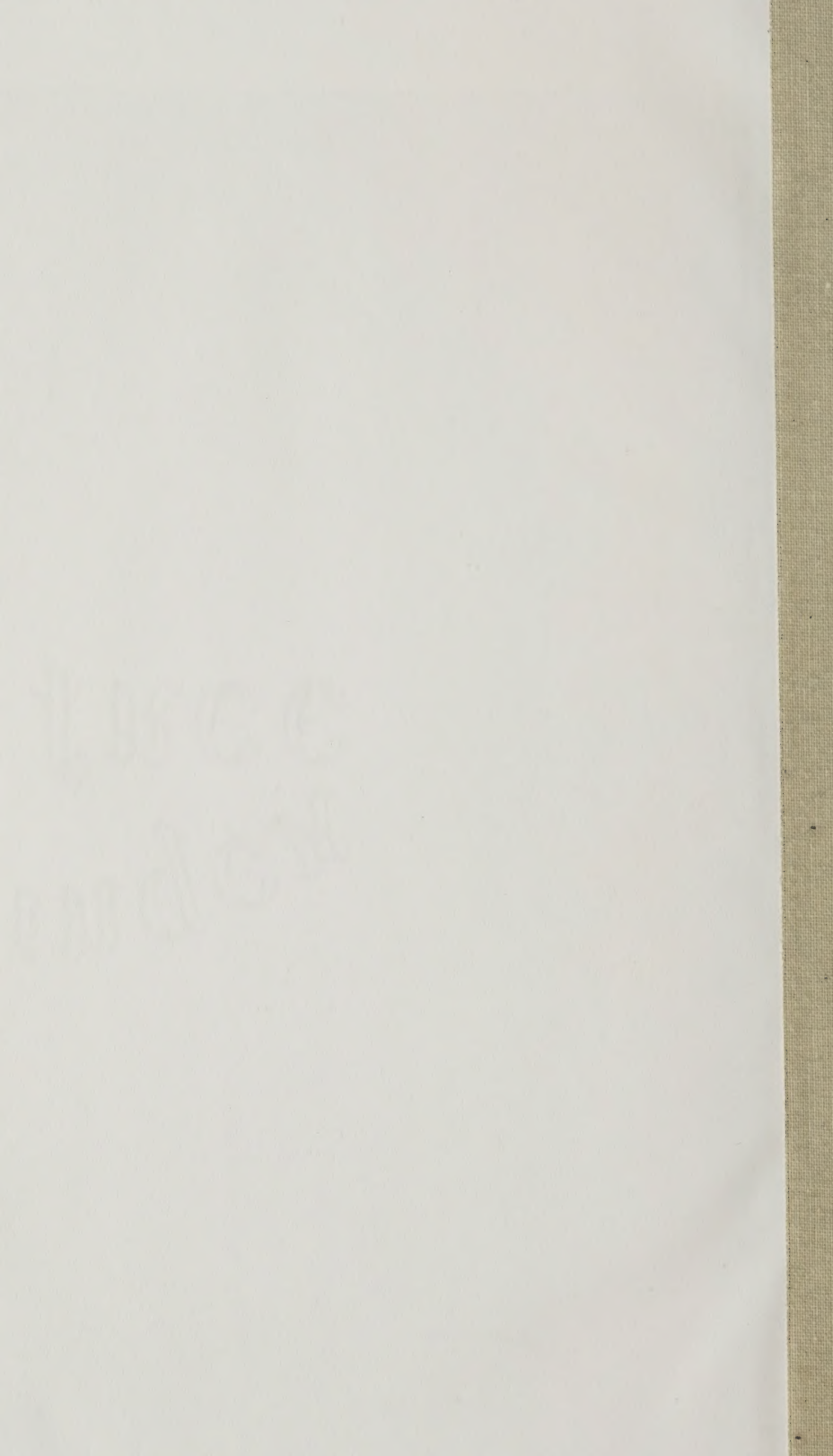
His spirit is ours, or would be, if we cared enough. The images of his belief walk the world still like the only realities. They are the imaginations of the poet, in a way nothing but dreams, and in another way the rock which endures when the crown has fallen and the creed ceased and the race become a memory.







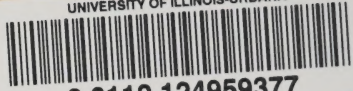








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